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**An evaluation of the delivery and outcomes of  
Halton Lodge Children's Centre French language  
teaching service: *La Petite École***

**Executive Summary**

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**July 2008**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

Sure Start Children's Centres are a key component of the Government's 10 year childcare strategy. This strategy builds on the original Sure Start local programme model introduced in 1999, which aimed to meet the needs of families with children aged 0 to 4 years living in areas of high socio-economic deprivation. Halton Lodge Children's Centre was established in 2006 under the lead of NCH, having developed from the Jolly Giraffe Sure Start local programme.

In 2006, Halton Lodge Children's Centre introduced French sessions for children and parents, referred to as *La Petite École* (The Little School). The stated purpose and overall aim of *La Petite École* is to introduce the possibility of learning a new language to children and families through an informal and play-based approach. Since the introduction of *La Petite École* sessions at Halton Lodge Children's Centre, language teaching links have been made with two local primary schools. The possibility of future partnership work has also been discussed with St. Chad's High School, a specialist language college.

### **Study design and methodology**

This was an exploratory study designed to provide an overview of the processes and outcomes of the *La Petite École* service, to aid Halton Lodge Children's Centre staff in deciding future strategy with regard to language teaching activity. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. Quantitative methods were used to establish levels of service usage, whilst qualitative methods included observation of the *La Petite École* service, a focus group with service users, interviews with staff facilitating the group and local school teachers, and a face-to-face questionnaire with non users of the *La Petite École* service.

### **Findings**

The evaluation found evidence that the *La Petite École* service at Halton Lodge Children's Centre was meeting its aims and objectives. The *La Petite École* service provides opportunities for enjoyable and shared experiences leading to the learning of basic French vocabulary for both children and adults. Parents were participating in their child's learning of French in the sessions at the Children's Centre and there was evidence that they were also continuing this learning in the home. Whilst the children in the current study were by no means fluent in French or bilingual, it was not the intention that they would be, and there was evidence of the successful acquisition of and engagement with a second language.

It was apparent from both observations of *La Petite École* sessions and the available monitoring data that the *La Petite École* service was attended by only a small number of parents and children. However, with places limited to 12 children it was evident that some of the families who had a place on the *La Petite École* service only access the sessions on a drop in basis, rather than having a weekly commitment. As a result, spaces appear to be available that could be accessed by other children who currently occupy the waiting list. This is an area that Halton Lodge Children's Centre staff may wish to address in order to allow the service to engage with as many children as possible.

One of the proposed outcomes for *La Petite École* was that those children exposed to a foreign language at an early age should be enabled to excel at it in future learning. Anecdotal evidence suggests there have been benefits for those children who have received support in French in primary school once they are attending secondary school. It also appears that introducing French within pre-school helps to increase children's awareness of foreign languages and to improve their experience as they move through the education system. However, in order to test this theory more robustly a number of measures would have to be put into place such as a method of identifying those children who have received an intervention through *La Petite École*, the assessment of French language skills at the point of entry to and exit from primary school and a method to track the levels of exposure foreign languages as children progress through the education system. Currently different schools are providing varying levels of exposure to foreign languages. As a result it may be difficult to track and compare the experience gained by each child.

## **Conclusions**

It was evident from this study that the *La Petite École* service offered at Halton Lodge Children's Centre was highly thought of by parents who had accessed the service, professionals who were involved in service provision and other health and education professionals who had knowledge of the service. *La Petite École* was achieving its overall aim of introducing the possibility of learning a new language to children and families through an informal and play-based approach. Links had been forged with local primary schools, and the development of these links would seem to be the way forward in providing an expanded service and a partnership approach to language learning for children in Halton. In addition, the development of a way of tracking children through the education system would help to evaluate what the long term impact of introducing French language to pre-school children may be.